

Taming the Monstrous Machines:

A Bold Witness against Mountaintop-Removal Mining

by Joyce Hollyday

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Some have called it “eco-terrorism against our selves.” Others have labeled it “strip mining on steroids,” claiming that it is turning Appalachia into a “national sacrifice zone.”

Whatever words one uses to describe it, mountaintop-removal coal mining has unleashed weapons of mass destruction against the world’s oldest and biologically richest temperate-zone hardwood forest.

More than 500 mountains in Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee have been blown apart by almost 2 billion pounds of explosives. Nearly 1.2 million acres of forest have been annihilated, causing massive loss of wildlife habitat and condemning an area the size of the state of Delaware to the look and feel of a war zone.

Those who live in affected communities have watched their valleys fill up with rubble and their streams with poisons. Many live in harm’s way below impoundment sites that hold back billions of gallons of dangerous coal waste. A few of the site’s dams have failed, releasing torrents of toxins, killing fish and polluting groundwater for thousands of Appalachia’s residents.

Coal, according to Greg Yost, a member of Circle of Mercy congregation in Asheville, NC, is destructive at every stage. Extracting it desecrates the landscape and endangers the ecosystem. Burning it overheats the planet, spewing more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than all the pollution from our cars. Disposing of its waste products poisons streams, suffocates valleys and creates health problems.

All of this is for very little gain. Mountaintopremoval mining provides only seven percent of total US coal production. Investments in clean energy and conservation could easily replace it. Yost felt compelled to do something about this massive violation of the earth and its people.

“For years, decades even,” he says, “I’ve worried about the ecological precariousness of human civilization. Some people are sure that whatever else happens, the world will go on—but I’m not so sure. The ecological death spiral of late-stage capitalism is terrifying. I want to look away, but I can’t.”

Yost sees bringing an end to mountaintop-removal mining as a “must-win battle” in the struggle to preserve the planet. In the summer of 2009, he traveled to Boone County, WV, in support of an ongoing resistance campaign.

On June 18—after days of planning, role-playing, combing aerial surveillance photos and analyzing scouting reports—he and 13 others crossed onto a 2,250-acre Massey Energy surface mine at about 2:30 in the morning. Dodging mine vehicles, hiding behind boulders and climbing a wall of rubble, they made their way in the darkness toward their goal: a 20-story-high dragline—a crane-like behemoth with a sweeping boom that is used for digging up the rubble that is left after a mountain is blasted away.

Yost carried a 70-pound backpack containing a huge banner for climbers to hang after scaling the dragline. For a brief moment in time, the words “Stop Mountaintop Removal” hung from its boom. Yost and the others were apprehended and arrested for their bold action. At a subsequent hearing, he was fined \$1,900 for trespass and conspiracy.

Reflecting on the risk he took, Yost says, “We need to recognize the power that we have, which is more than we’ve dared believe. If there is hope for us, we’ll find this power within ourselves and each other—first to dig our heels into the ground to stop the madmen who would drag us over a cliff, and then to summon the power to build something new.”

But Yost claims that power isn’t the whole story. “As a follower of Jesus,” he says, “I’m convinced that the true heart of the matter actually lies in the mystery of powerlessness.

“The diabolical powers of violence, fear and hatred that we face are too great to defeat head on. We need an asymmetrical warfare, the jujitsu of nonviolence. And love. Definitely we need love.”

Yost saw this at work at the dragline. Anti-mining activists have been targets of assaults and death threats from those protecting mountaintop removal. That morning he saw men who were angry and prone to violence thrown off balance by the committed nonviolence of the protesters.

“We bought our way onto the mine site with nothing more than our willingness to offer up our own bodily safety in the face of nightmarish machines,” Yost says. “We ended up climbing on the machines, and, for a time, we tamed them.” For half a day, the monstrous machines fell silent as a result of the protest.

“We carried nothing with us that guaranteed us whatever success we had,” continues Yost. “This was our secret: Our empty hands were like the stones in the old fable of stone soup. To them we added our intelligence, our resourcefulness, our courage and our determination. To these, God added a blessing. It was enough.”

—*Joyce Hollyday is a co-founder and co-pastor of Circle of Mercy in Asheville, NC. For more information on mountaintop-removal mining and a bibliography, see Plundering Appalachia: The Tragedy of Mountaintop-Removal Coal Mining, edited by Tom Butler and George Wuerthner; or go to www.iLoveMountains.org or www.mountainaction.org.*